

D20-2

Notes on Psychoanalysis and Nightmare Alley

Chuck Kleinhans

Psychoanalysis offered a way of developing film theory with attention to unconscious mental processes--that is mental operations that take place below the level of conscious articulation but which we know exist because of traces in everyday life such as meaningful "slips of the tongue," dreams, etc. Because the film viewing experience often seems to involve very deep appeals to non-rational mental activity such as dreams, or similar to them, it seems knowing more about such processes would help us understand how film acts on spectators.

Psychoanalytic theory is the most syncretic system since the Roman pantheon; a new Logos may be added on without displacing any of the older elements: the garments of the other sex allegedly also symbolize the father's penis; or getting into mother's skin and thus being sheltered in her womb or (if you belong to a different school) her penis; or being mother herself, either mother with a phallus, mother without, or both simultaneously; or the garments serving to protect mother from destruction; or being father's penis inside mother's vagina; or the need to protect the father's introjected penis in mother's womb (of which there is inherited knowledge in the collective unconscious) from oral and anal attack.

To take on and separate out for clear viewing the fortune cookie metapsychology, speculations, fantasies, pomposities, humbug, absurdities, outrageous yet unchallenged pronouncements, marvelous suggestions, brilliant insights, and original and demonstrable findings would take a work of obsessive-compulsive scholarship I do not have the desire and patience to undertake. Few of the key words of our [psychoanalytic] language are definable except by other key words which are themselves undefinable (for example, "narcissism is the cathexis of the self"); little is stated as a proposition that can be tested in this observable world but rather only by recourse to authority or manipulation of more theory. And even after taking these unnecessary risks, we are often left only with a dramatically complicated rendering of the obvious. (Stoller, 1975; 82-83.)

Nightmare Alley

I: Carnival

First sequence: What is a geek?

**Zeena: represented by image; geek represented by word
initial questions (enigma)**

Stan: "How do you get a guy to be a geek?"

Stan: his superior feeling to the crowd

(the con artist)

Christian sin

hubris (pride), error of classical tragedy

Zeena: used to be big in vaudeville

introduction of major theme: before and after, past and present and future, history

Zeena's tawdry sexual past

note use of close ups between Zeena and Stan: the "big time"
tied into the profession of story telling, mind reading, etc.

introduction of the "code"

introduction of the "stock reading"

(from Pete: will re-appear later)

repetition and difference

the oedipal pattern

father/son conflict over woman initially linked to older man

Pete/Stan in relation to Zena

wood alcohol vs. consumable alcohol

the Marshal incident

new oedipal pattern

Bruno/Stan re Molly

revelation of Stan's past:

abandoned by parents,

grew up in orphanage,

reform school

(missing oedipal past)

II. Chicago

themes of language, seeing/hearing

meeting with psychologist, Lilith Ritter

significance of name Lilith

connection of psychoanalysis and mind reading

linked as hoax, later "professional courtesy"

return of theme of tarot cards, "readings"

on sound track--reappearance of geek as audio memory

recordings as another form of sound memory

first therapy session

"a perfectly sound human being"..."selfish and ruthless when you want something"

further enigma, what's Ritter's interest in Stan?

STOP READING AT THIS POINT IF YOU WANT TO EXPERIENCE THE NARRATIVE TURN AS SURPRISE

the trickster tricked, conning the con man, the gypsy switch, the grifter duped

III. Various places, return to Carnival

equation of visions and alcoholism

hallucination

the recognition scene: return to Stan/Molly
"don't you know me?"

Phallic woman.

The image of the phallic woman is most clearly seen in pornography. In the male bondage film, one of the subgenres of film pornography, the phallic woman or dominatrix dresses in such a way as to suggest she has a penis. This effect is accomplished in at least two ways: she either wears a dildo or she adorns her whole body with phallic trappings (long black boots, whips, chains, and so on) which suggest that her actual body is a penis or phallic substitute. In this type of pornography the male plays the masochist, begging the phallic woman to humiliate and degrade him.

The most obvious representation of the phallic woman in mainstream cinema is the femme fatale of film noir: her phallicism is suggested by her clothing (black dresses, long pointed fingernails, cigarette holders, and so on) and by the fact that she frequently carries a gun. Dangerous, deceptive, exciting, sensuous--the femme fatale presents a challenge to male power, particularly the power of the father, a sin for which she must ultimately be destroyed. Some of the most memorable phallic women of film noir and Barbra Stanwyk in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, Paramount, 1944) Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* (Bill Wilder, Paramount, 1950), and Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, RKO, 1947)

Feminist film theory is interested in the phallic woman because her image by inverting the power dynamics within male-female relationships, points to a crisis within the workings of sexist ideology. Freudian psychoanalytic theory holds that the male child initially believes that the mother, whom he desires emotionally and physically, is exactly like himself--that is, that she too has a penis. His later realization that she is without a penis arouses in him fears about his own possible castration. His anxiety is likely to be increased if he mistakes her menstrual blood for the blood which he believes is flowing from her wound. Rather than acknowledge the real nature of the female genitals, he may set up a fetish which comes to stand in for them. Frequently, this fetish is a part of woman's anatomy which is reassuring and does not remind him of the possibility of castration. Often it is that part on which his averted glance first fell immediately after he turned away in shock from the sight of her genital area. Hence, fetish objects are frequently a woman's legs or shoes, or fur (which stands in for pubic hair). Recently some feminist theorists have turned their attention to the notion of the phallic woman in order to develop a theory of identification and the look which places the male in a subordinate, masochistic position rather than in a sadistic one. (Creed, 1991, 314)